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DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT OF CUSTOMERS: ENCHANTING THE USERS

Palak Kanojia[1] , Vani Kanojia[2] and K. Varsha[3]
[1]Assistant Professor , Hansraj College, University of Delhi.
[2]Student,Dept. of Commerce, Delhi School of Economics ,University of Delhi.
[3]Assistant Professor,Hansraj College, University of Delhi.
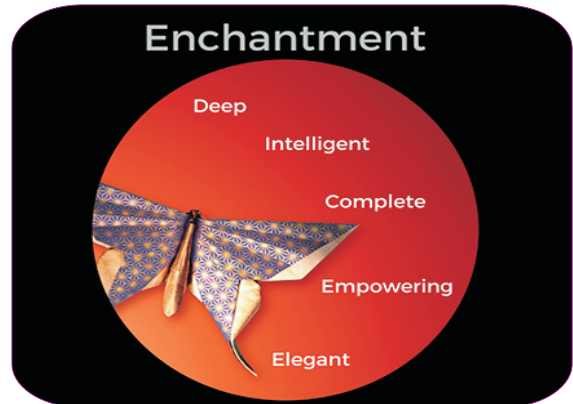
ABSTRACT

In this epoch of "Digital Bharat", electronic marketing has become an indispensable feature of the business world. One of the most crucial tools of electronic marketing is the digital engagement of the customers. With the digital engagement the companies have an advantage to directly talk to their customers. Due to presence of high end technological solutions the marketers have access to innumerable channels but the dilemma persists that which channel to opt for. This paper draws the attention of the companies on the significance of digital customer engagement to maintain thriving customer relationships. The paper chalks out the key points to be kept in mind while designing any digital engagement plan on the basis of the review of literature done, by following the trends in the market as ascertained from recent publications. Lastly, the gaps in the literature have also been screened out to suggest the further scope of research in the emerging field of digital engagement. The predicament of managing customer relationships using technology continues and hence this enigma has been deciphered through this paper by proposing constructive recommendations to the companies. The best approach would be to look for the most beneficial channels and blend the approach with the brick and mortar channels so as to have a portfolio of diverse channels. As we know, we should not keep all our eggs in one basket, the approach should be multi channel as well as diversified. Technology can amplify the results especially through sharing of opinions hence it can work in either ways, positive or negative. It is upon the companies that how well they use it so as to achieve positive results.

KEYWORDS: *Digital Engagement , Digital Bharat , electronic marketing .*

INTRODUCTION :
        "Digital engagement uses digital tools and techniques to find, listen to and mobilise a community around an issue that might involve getting them to talk about it, give you their views or take action in pursuit of a cause they care about." (Digital Engagement, n.d.)

Figure 1: Digital Engagement
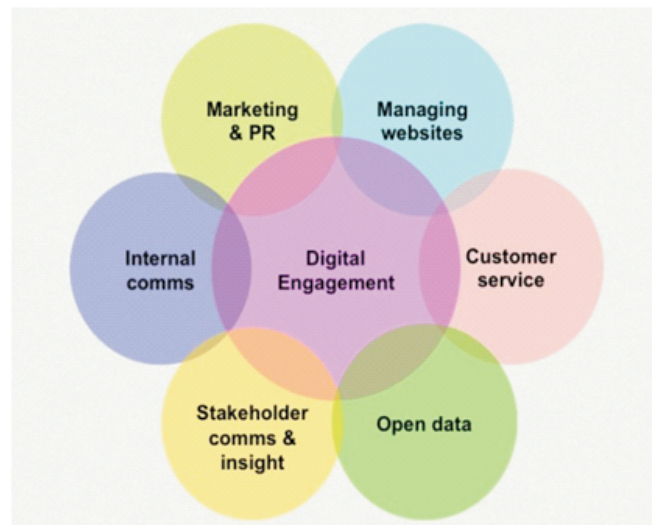
Source: (Digital Engagement, n.d.) from *http://www.digitalengagement.info/what/*

Mollen and Wilson (2010) have defined online engagement as, "Online engagement is a cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value. It is characterized by the dimensions of dynamic and sustained cognitive processing and the satisficing of instrumental value (utility and relevance) and experiential value (emotional congruence with the narrative schema encountered in computer-mediated entities)."

In simple words, Digital customer engagement is a continuous process of communication where there is an ongoing dialogue between the company and customers on real-time basis using digital technology to create valuable and durable relationships. The goal of digital customer engagement is leveraging the technology to improve customer experience by following a multi-channel approach to create a right blend of various media, channels and touch-points such that the automation of business processes results in maximised conversions, meet customer expectations and build long term loyalty as well as advocacy.

In the survey by PwC, it was found that 27% of people discover brand via social media and 59% follow brands or retailers on social media. (Janowiecki, Driscoll, & Anker, 2013) The key objectives of using digital platforms by private companies are:
1. To target individual customers so that to match and create tailor made experiences that are individual specific.
2. To invest in strengthening the customer loyalty.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In this epoch of "Digital Bharat", electronic marketing has become an indispensable feature of the business world. One of the most crucial tools of electronic marketing is the digital engagement of the customers. With the digital engagement the companies have an advantage to directly talk to their customers. Objectives of the study are mainly:
i. To understand the concept of digital customer engagement in relation to theoretical framework as well as practical application based on the review of existing literature on digital customer engagement.
ii. To identify possible areas and direction of future research in these areas.

Due to presence of high end technological solutions the marketers have access to innumerable channels but the dilemma persists that which channel to opt for. This paper draws the attention of the companies on the significance of digital customer engagement to maintain thriving customer relationships.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The paper chalks out the key points to be kept in mind while designing any digital engagement plan on the

basis of the review of literature done, by following the trends in the market as ascertained from recent publications. Lastly, the gaps in the literature have also been screened out to suggest the further scope of research in the emerging field of digital engagement. On the basis of the literature review and trends of the companies undertaken for the purpose of this study, the recommendations have been suggested for designing the customer engagement programs and their successful implementation. The objectives of the study have been successfully achieved as the implications for the companies are practically applicable.

INTERNET OF THINGS

"The Internet population continues its meteoric growth from 60 million in 2009 to 190 million in 2014, to our estimate of potential growth to over 550 million users by 2018." (Shah, Jain, & Bajpai, 2015) The technology has overtaken many of those things which used to be the staple in our daily lives at some point of time. Due to technology a lot of these things became obsolete like remembering phone numbers, looking up dictionary, developing negatives of photographs, using address books, encyclopaedia & digital diaries, sending postcards, collection of CDs and cassettes, using alarm clocks and typewriters, etc. The advent of technological innovations has changed the lifestyles and the way the people are engaging in the e-commerce activities now-a-days. The buying patterns are impacted by the technologies and the consumer behaviour is hugely affected. The companies have started operating digitally; marketing research and R&D departments are now dependent on big data for tapping the information and preferences of consumers. (Geetanjali, 2015, April 21)

The restaurants and food chains are applying promotional tactics to engage customers via digital means. These chains want to acquire more and more customers by giving them special offer and discounts whenever the customer comes to eat at their place. The digital Point of Sale (PoS) systems capture the information of the customers through their mobile numbers and card details while they place orders and then the information is used to prepare and store consumer profiles in the database systems to offering them customised deals according to their purchase transactions done in the past. The benefit of information system is exploited while formulating promotional strategies and customizing the services. (Bhushan, April 22, 2015)

DEVELOPMENT OF SMART CITIES

"Digital Commerce market in India has registered an average growth of almost 35% since 2010. Total Digital Commerce market in India was valued at INR 53,301 Crores in December 2013 and grew at 53% through 2014 and reached INR 81,525 Crores by the end of December 2014. The industry is estimated to grow further at a rate of 33% and cross INR one lakh crores by the end of 2015." (IAMAI Report, 2015)

India is now moving ahead in creating the smart-cities using the various technologies. Location-based services are helping to engage the citizens and businesses, to deliver the services seamlessly and to make the services accessible to greater number of people. This will inculcate a digital culture in the country's working systems. (Murty, et al., 2015, June 3)

With the digital expansion in the world, the global universities are also going digital in imparting education to the students. The best universities want to expand their horizons by going online and offer MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) to such regions where it is difficult to reach. (Salunkhe, 2015) Education can play an important role in shaping the society's perceptions and consumer behavior. Virtual education will embody the society with the digital culture and mold the community of customers to be engaged digitally with the institutes and organizations.

The digital technologies are not only being used by the B2C companies but also attracting B2B firms to take advantage of the sophisticated innovations. Not only the consumer preferences changing but also the way the producers are operating has changed a lot. (Shrivasatava, 2015, April 21)

SHORTCOMINGS OF DIGITAL DISRUPTION

Due to digital advancement, modern art has also received a new medium to reach out to people and market of art lovers. The online sales of art works by various artists have been increasing day by day. But the modern technology has also brought up new matters of concern. Where the internet is providing the consumers a convenient option to buy pieces of art at considerably lower prices than the huge commissions charged by the

majority of auction art houses, the virtual nature of internet is posing a threat to authenticity of the art pieces sold on the websites like eBay. (Gastwirth & Johnson, 2011)

For making the choices the consumers are depending upon the technology, this overt dependence on technology is condemned by Rushkoff and many other theorists. Douglas Rushkoff argued that how social media, Big Data and digital technology are hampering the marketers' abilities to connect with consumers instead of helping them. "Digital disruption interferes with the social interaction and society's value creation." Digital technology is meant for the people to express and experience in creative and self determined ways. Instead, digital technology has led to creating customer profiles used to pre-determine the customers' trends and choices. As far as businesses are concerned, it has led to less creative and innovative businesses, as it depends more on predicting what consumers want on the basis of their recent purchase history. "…looking at what's just happened in the store, you're necessarily looking back." (Soat, 2015) Digital technology by its very nature wants us to be present at too many places at the same time i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc. But being humans, this results into less productivity and we limit our ways of communicating to the ways in which computers interact in lieu of extending the ways that we can interact via technology. Digital media and advertisers want to be on every digital platform available online rather they should try to create a larger cohesive message.

The marketer's requirement of being present on each and every platform acts as an impediment since the focus of the advertiser shifts from customer engagement to advertising. Moreover the budgets are spent on advertising rather than retaining the customers and keeping them engaged for the longer span of time. The counterfeit products sold online also break the trust and this impedes the process of successful digital engagement.

Cyber-security issues are a by-product of internet explosion. Internet users are usually faced with insecure networks, fake websites, malicious software and eavesdropping. Customers are most vulnerable to communication channels threats like hacking, sniffing, spoofing and phishing. Credit card thefts and money being siphoned off from the financial accounts of customers make them resist the digital acceptance of products. Denial of services impairs the interaction between the brand and its users. Users gets frustrated with the issues like service overloading and message overloading causing the online experience to be unpleasant, thereby leading to disengagement.

With the high rate of social media explosion the brands are more likely to face negative e-word of mouth from the online customer forums as well as dissatisfied customers. Although the brands have an opportunity to re-connect with the dissatisfied set of customers and convert their negative experiences into positives. But despite of the existence of tools and medium, they are not able to do so. Moreover, the companies spend time, effort and money on unprofitable customers and fail to gain much due to a downfall in the conversion rate.

LESSONS FOR THE COMPANIES FOR ENGAGING THE CUSTOMERS DIGITALLY

Despite the shortcomings of the digital advancements, it can be used to interact in the countless number of ways that it opens as possible avenues to reach our goal of connecting to the customers. Following are the key lessons for the companies on how to enhance the online consumer experience for a successful customer engagement digitally:

MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACH

i.The need of the hour is to adopt a multi-channel sales approach by integrating digital channels with the brick and mortar markets. Managers should constantly engage customers by updating their ways of communication and applying innovative strategies, while creating experiences for customers following should be kept in mind.
ii.While designing the digital engagement program companies must provide their customers with multiple channels and the autonomy to choose among different channels of contact and shift to the new ones. (Panchal, 2015)

TELE-PRESENCE

i.Education can play an important role in shaping the society's perceptions and consumer behavior. Virtual education will embody the society with the digital culture and mold the community of customers to be engaged

digitally with the institutes and organizations. (Salunkhe, 2015)

ii.Marketers should focus on making attention getting stories and using digital media they must try to create an emotional connection through such narratives which can garner trust of the customers. (Crosby & Zak, 2015)

iii.For companies, the way of digital engagement of consumers by way of story-telling and letting the consumers see how company works is much easier. Rather than branding to camouflage the customers about the products the real worthy stories should be created out of how the brand has emerged.

OPTIMUM UTILIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

i.Large number of friends on Facebook positively impacts the self-efficacy of an individual. This might be the reason why do bloggers and page admins aim for increasing the number of readers and likers of the page i.e. more number of members simply mean more engagement. (Jongsung, 2013)

ii.Social media platforms should be used to develop new support base or for having dialogue with the citizens. (Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015)

iii.Not just the engagement of customers with the organisation will help building relationships but also social interactions, shared experiences and engagement of new customers with the community of identified patrons will also produce positive results for the company. Now-a- days, with the digital advancement and due to presence of social media it has become easier to connect the existing customers with the new ones as well as with prospective customers.

LET THE CONSUMER TELL YOU

i.In order to engage customers all the policies of the companies should revolve around the customers. Companies are localising by language, technology, content as well as policies. While developing the applications, the focus should be on designing more user-centric apps with convenient features.

ii.Organizations should involve the customers for their valuable insights, feedback and treat their customers as "business partners" who should be engaged in creating new products & services. (Aldrich, 2013)

iii.The firms must avoid putting any ambiguous information which might confuse the consumers ultimately leading to putting off the decision to buy or engage further. (Gastwirth & Johnson, 2011)

TRIGGER EMOTIONAL ASPECTS

Marketers must focus on building the emotional congruence with their existing, potential and future customers. The audience should be engaged as such it creates an emotional link and they must feel a relation with the brand or the company.

i.For a stronger conviction from the customers, the emotional aspect needs to be touched upon while engaging with them digitally. (Birkner, 'Next' Steps, 2015)

ii.Using the digital network of such independent followers is much more beneficial to reach the goal of creating a viral campaign. (Smith, 2015)

iii.A way to connect to the people is to solve their problems and connect to them emotionally. (Birkner, Fully Engaged, 2014)

Figure 2: Lessons for the Companies for Digital Customer Engagement

Lessons for the Companies for Engaging the Customers Digitally

On the basis of our studies, the following points have been chalked out which must be kept in mind while designing the digital engagement programs by the marketers or corporate.

Multi-Channel Approach	Tele-Presence	Optimum Utilization of Social Media	Let the Consumer Tell You	Trigger Emotional Aspects
• New ways of involving customer in co-creation processes • Customers must be given the autonomy to choose among different channels • Integrate digital channels with the brick and mortar markets.	• Virtual education can help develop a culture of digitisation • Make attention getting stories to create an emotional connection • Letting the consumers see how company works	• Increasing the number of readers and likers of the page • Develop new support base or for have dialogue with the citizens • social interactions, shared experiences and engagement of new customers with the community of identified patrons	• Design more user-centric apps with convenient features • Direct involvement of consumers in co-creation and at various stages • Treat customers as "business partners" • social interactions and community of highly identified patrons	• interactive, unique and valuable content • authentic stories • solve their problems and connect to them emotionally • Create long lasting impactful and emotional content for social contagion

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE OF FURTHER RESEARCH

The major limitations of the study include the anecdotal approach followed for the inscription of the suggestions recommended to the organisations and marketers. There is a lack of empirical research and the variables proposed through the study need to be tested for the robust results. The study has postulated the theory for testable hypothesis on the basis of recent literature and trends only. Further studies can be extended in the following areas:

Digital Environment: The impact of digital environment can be classified further and studied in detail. The credibility of different platforms can be explored to decipher the puzzle of creating a portfolio of selected digital platforms which are most engaging. (Salunkhe, 2015) There should be a more in-depth study of the authenticity of the digital environment by observing the untainted blogs and websites which showcase the opinions of the audiences or customers without scathing any information. (Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015)

Social Media: The social relationships can be studied in relation to digital engagement via social media platforms where the companies interact with their customers and audience is engaged virtually. There is a need to validate the direct relationship between engagement and optimal consumer attitudes and behaviours empirically. (Mollen & Wilson, 2010)

Role of consumer demographics: Engagement activity may vary according to different demographic factors of the consumer. These demographics like age, gender, location, status, self concept etc. impact the brand engagement. The proposed that higher involvement enhances the customers' intention to participate in virtual community can be tested empirically. (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005)

Role of situational factors: It has been propose to study the behavioural influences on online customer experience and engagement. Role of situational involvement may impact the trust and thereby engagement, hence, such a relationship should be studied in detail. Previous affiliations and patron identification have to be studied further. (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009)

The research calls for an extensive research on emerging issues and challenges faced by the companies in the times of dynamic environment of constantly changing technologies and find innovative solutions to engage customers digitally.

CONCLUSION

Due to presence of high end technological solutions the marketers have access to innumerable channels but the dilemma persists that which channel to opt for. This paper draws the attention of the companies on the significance of digital customer engagement to maintain thriving customer relationships. The predicament of

managing customer relationships using technology continues and hence this enigma has been deciphered through this paper by proposing constructive recommendations to the companies. The best approach would be to look for the most beneficial channels and blend the approach with the brick and mortar channels so as to have a portfolio of diverse channels. As we know, we should not keep all our eggs in one basket, the approach should be multi channel as well as diversified. Technology can amplify the results especially through sharing of opinions hence it can work in either ways, positive or negative. It is upon the companies that how well they use it so as to achieve positive results.

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Palak Kanojia
Assistant Professor , Hansraj College, University of Delhi.

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